

SENATOR SARAH ELFRETH  
*Legislative District 30*  
Anne Arundel County

Budget and Taxation Committee

*Subcommittees*

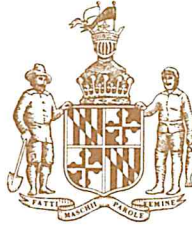
Education, Business and Administration

Chair, Pensions

*Senate Chair*

Joint Committee on Administrative,  
Executive, and Legislative Review

Joint Committee on the Chesapeake and  
Atlantic Coastal Bays Critical Area



James Senate Office Building  
11 Bladen Street, Room 103  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401  
410-841-3578 • 301-858-3578  
800-492-7122 Ext. 3578  
Fax: 410-841-3156 • 301-858-3156  
Sarah.Elfreth@senate.state.md.us

THE SENATE OF MARYLAND  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

February 12, 2020

**Testimony in Favor of SB524**  
**Building Lifelong Library Learners Act**

Chairman Pinsky, Vice-Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee,

I respectfully request a favorable report of Senate Bill 524, the Building Lifelong Library Learners Act. This Bill will make Maryland the first state in the nation to go fine-free for children, increase the State per-capita funding for libraries, increase the capital support we provide to libraries, and increase the State Library Resource Center funding.

One would be hard-pressed to think of a greater public good than the library. Libraries are free, welcoming places where anyone can expand their worldview with a new book, use the computer to search for a new career opportunity, a local troop of Boys or Girl Scouts can hold their monthly meeting, and, perhaps most importantly, and a young person can build a lifelong love for reading and learning.

Some of my fondest memories growing up feature countless visits to my community library, tucked into a hidden corner, falling in love with literature through the eyes of Anne of Green Gables and exploring the Arctic with *The Call of the Wild*. As a child of divorce, libraries provided a stable environment that could always be counted upon. Every child deserves that same opportunity to feel welcomed in their community library. Unfortunately, the small but prohibitive financial barriers of late fees can create barriers between children, one of our greatest community assets, and potentially a lifelong love of learning.

SB 524 seeks to create that welcoming environment by eliminating late fees for children and teens. This is not a novel idea - all but six counties in our State already have similar policies. You will find 22 letters of support from nearly every jurisdiction's county library in your bill file. The American Library Association passed a resolution, attached, just last year to encourage library systems to go fine-free in an effort to balance social inequality and encourage library participation. Thankfully, and this is not from an Onion article, more Americans visited a public library than went to the movies last year<sup>1</sup>. We have an opportunity to encourage that participation and create lifelong learners with SB 524.

To be clear, this bill is no free ride. Libraries will still send notifications for late books and be empowered to charge replacement fees 21 days after a book is due. Children will still be taught responsibility and

<sup>1</sup> Gallup, "In U.S., Library Visits Outpaced Trips to Movies in 2019." January 4, 2020.

accountability - but without the potentially shameful and oftentimes financial roadblock of a late fee. In Anne Arundel County, 20% of children were blocked from borrowing new books because of outstanding late fees. That means thousands of children were blocked from enjoying a thoroughly American tradition and fundamental right that is borrowing books from their community library.

SB 524 also provides greater support for libraries through investments in three critical programs:

- Increased support for State aid for libraries by \$0.40 per capita (from \$16.70 to \$17.10).
- Increased support for the State Library Resource Center by \$0.20 per capita that supports special collections and technical training for libraries across Maryland.
- Increased support for the Library Capital Grant Program from \$5 million to \$7.5 million annually (first increase since the Program was created in FY2008) that supports libraries across Maryland.

We have worked hand-in-hand with the libraries to make this the strongest bill possible. With that in mind, we will be submitting to this Committee amendments that make the following changes:

- Changing “books” to “materials” in the bill to encompass more materials that children may borrow from a library;
- Clarifying the terminology of “fine” or “fee” in the bill as “fees” are for the replacement of materials and “fines” are for late returns;
- Extending the implementation date to 2021 to ensure that our libraries receive the full benefit of the State funding increases and have time to make these administrative changes;
- Clarifying that “special collections” are not included in the fine prohibition; and,
- Enabling each respective library board of trustees to implement the bill.

Children are more likely to continue behavior, such as reading, volunteering, and civic engagement, that they start early in life into adulthood. We have an opportunity to help shape those values in Maryland’s young people with SB 524.

The late Speaker Mike Busch is often remembered for his leadership in championing public schools, recreation, and efforts to save the Chesapeake Bay. He also played a critical role in creating the Library Capital Grant Program in 2008 to better support these pillars of learning and public life. That fund has not been increased since its inception. SB 524 serves as a fitting tribute to his legacy.

I ask the Committee to remember Walter Cronkite’s words when considering this bill: “Whatever the cost of our libraries, the price is cheap compared to that of an ignorant nation.” SB 524 is the right investment to help build lifelong library learners. I respectfully request a favorable report.

Sincerely,



Sarah Elfrest